Who Paints the Landscape of War at the Start of the 21st Century?

By Dr. David Sloggett

Editorial Abstract: Dr. Sloggett examines the myriad challenges of imaging the modern influence operations battlespace, comparing Coalition efforts in current theaters of operation to actual artistic styles. He explores the necessity of proper power words in crafting messages, and calls for simple, consistent forms of artistry in defense-related words and deeds.

For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.

-- Sun Tzu

To introduce into the philosophy of war a principle of moderation would be an absurdity – war is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds

-- Carl Von Clausewitz

Introduction

These two well-known quotations illustrate one of the enduring paradoxes of warfare. Do we want to adopt the philosophy of Sun Tzu and show the highest acme of skill, or do we wish to engage in all-out warfare and take on the ideas of Von Clausewitz? If we accept Sun Tzu's premise, then achieving success requires greater fidelity in understanding the human terrain as the backdrop against which we operate military forces. As the 21st century unfolds, with all of its underlying potential for future conflict between civilizations as presaged by Samuel Huntingdon, how should we be planning to conduct future wars?

This article suggests a metaphor based upon the various schools of art. It suggests that commanders need to think of the intelligence material they are presented as an interpretation of the social landscape, against which they are addressing their planning and combat operations. Schools such as the surrealists and the impressionists offer insights into the way that intelligence communities draw out the images that we see presented to commanders, to help them develop their situational awareness. The issue for any commander is to see through the work of the artist, and understand the underlying landscape and real world scene that the artist interpreted. In developing this idea, I'll highlight the importance of how words help people paint the landscapes. It introduces the notion of 'power words'—those that have the ability to influence people and change their minds—and highlights the various stages needed to create a long-term and sustainable situation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Influencing Populations at the Start of the 21st Century

Without doubt, as the Israeli found at considerable cost in the 2006 Lebanon War, the ubiquitous media has a say in how one conducts 21st century warfare. If we do not create the conditions whereby we are seen to fight a proportionate and balanced war, where kinetic and non-kinetic approaches are seen at least in equal measure, we have the potential to alienate our own populations. We must garner vital support from home, as well from any host nation in which we operate.

Sun Tzu clearly understood that art had its place in warfare. He realized it was more an art form than a science. Making judgements on the battlefield from incomplete, ambiguous, equivocal and inconsistent information requires a picture to be painted that resolved these uncertainties. It was something which certain commanders intuitively possessed: they could see through the fog of war, taking decisive action when necessary. Today we refer to this as situational awareness. How then do we try to create the conditions to persuade and influence a local population, and gain situational awareness of the complex and multi-faceted human terrain?

Against this counterinsurgency background, what then is the art of war in the 21st century? Indeed, is it still an art form? Surely our technology gives us a huge advantage, and our information superiority creates the conditions for commanders to take decisions from a peerless viewpoint? One might argue that the art of war becomes redundant, forced out by the widespread adoption of the ubiquitous network. Commanders can now make scientific judgements based upon having a high confidence in the material provided by our technologies. Their situational awareness is unsurpassed. They can know what they need to know and harness it in their decision making. In the minds eye of major equipment suppliers—at least those that write the sales brochures—the enemy cannot hide or deceive. The question in the 21st century: is that true?

There is a danger that technologists fail to understand the socio-cultural and anthropological complexities of the environments in which we deploy forces. In Afghanistan, over 70% of the population has a mobile phone, typically used to keep in touch with their families. It has become de-rigueur to own a phone. While this has its benefits, it also presents problems: mobile phones can help rapidly spread rumors, and create conditions where we lose the consent of the population. The agility of the Coalition, with all its attendant needs to respect the wishes of families of servicemen killed in action, simply does not have the resources to respond to rumors—whose impact can be enduring.

In Afghanistan in the latter part of 2007, it took several days to show the Taliban's allegations of US personnel burning the Koran in the eastern province of Herat were untrue. When such events occur, there is potential for lasting doubts to exist in the minds of local members of the population, thus we need to conduct a thorough investigation of the events that actually took place. Our words,

initially as a holding position to create time for the investigation, require careful selection and consideration. We must address the insurgents' rumor mill, used to gain support for their position from locals—who may be very vulnerable to this form of agile tactical messaging coming from technically sophisticated, insurgents.

Counterinsurgency, and influence projection operations used keep the peace and deter warfare, pose a much greater challenge. Contemporary commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan are aware of this, and have started to develop approaches that place an emphasis upon the tactical narrative that is used on the ground. Brigadier Andrew Mackay [the Commander of UK Forces in Afghanistan] recently used the word "humiliated" when he described allowing the Taliban to escape through the back door at Musa Qal'ah. This was his intent, and his use of words was quite calculated and deliberate. He could have ridiculed their attempts to defend the town as part of a process to discredit their actions. After all, the insurgents dug a hole for themselves in the way they talked up the defence of the town before the operation.

Prior to the ISAF operations to recover the town, the insurgents made huge statements about their willingness to die and to become martyrs in the defence of Musa Qal'eh. Yet they took the easy way out. This use of power words helped create the conditions to marginalize an adversary, the first in what could be seen as a three-stage approach to securing progress over a 21st century counterinsurgency—with all the attendant media coverage.

Studies from [UK campaigns in] Malaya and Oman show the absolute need to divide the insurgents from the population. It is vital to disconnect them from their support base, and marginalize them. The question is how do we achieve such separation? The key stages in this process are reflected in three important power words: marginalize, alienate and irrelevant. These reflect the three-stage process to create conditions for success in Afghanistan.

This process should seek to marginalize the hard core insurgents from the so-called "Tier II Taliban"—mercenaries who fight for $20 a day. Marginalize and isolate them from the Tier I hard core, and we are helping create the conditions for the next step in the process: to reinforce this situation by alienating Tier I from the local population. Coalition forces created this situation in Iraq at the time of the surge in Al Anbar province, where local people ejected Al Qaeda once they saw what they stood for, and AQ's interpretation of Sharia Law. The locals where unhappy at the strictures placed upon them, and reacted accordingly. Even Osama Bin Laden's most recent televised broadcasts admit a number of mistakes made in Iraq. The real question is how do we use such remarks to our benefit, to discredit extremist organizations?

Collateral Language

The seminal work on power words is a compilation of essays published in the book *Collateral Language,* by several well known authors and writers in the field. This work provides insights across a number of disciplines. In the immediate aftermath of the on 11 September attacks, with all of the emotional overtones running through any government speeches and pronouncements, they addressed words such as "civilization" and "barbarism." The authors show how this use of language contrasts the approaches of the West, and those who would see us taken back to the 7th century—the time when Islam emerged as a force and spread rapidly across Northern Africa and into southern Europe. Comparisons of the actions of Hannibal and Genghis Khan show the 11 September terrorists as people who did not play by the rules in a military sense, and therefore are at war with our civilization. Our very existence is threatened by their actions and ideology.

This use of words paints pictures in the minds of Western target audiences. Today some refer to this as spin. These pictures create the conditions for governments to act on their behalf, to safeguard the future of our civilization. Other words discussed in *Collateral Language* include: evil, fundamentalism, justice, terrorism; with targets and perspectives offered on these words and their context, in the increasing efforts to secure support for a particular line of thinking and reasoning, from a wider audience.

In these circumstances the art of war moves from trying to see through the fog of war on the battlefield, like Field Marshall Montgomery at El Alamein, to seeing through the swirling mist of the dynamic socio-cultural, anthropological, ethno-religious and political factors that drive insurgencies. In today's emerging doctrine this is referred to as "influencing the local population." It is a difficult and complex thing to achieve.

Perhaps in painting this canvas, with all its subtle effects, the Raphaelites, the Flemish school of Rubens, the impressionism of Monet, the surrealism of Dali, the expressionism of Edvard Munch or the cubism of Picasso may give us clues?

The operational art of command, a key element in practicing the art of war, involves making decisions when things were uncertain. Artists, however, create a perspective of what they see: they commit their view on the world to canvas. Through their paintings, they convey varying degrees of factual and emotional representation. The ways they represent the world speak volumes for the messages they share with their audiences. This is particularly true of the expressionists. Military commanders also create perspectives of what they see—we call it situational awareness. This is often likened to creating a jigsaw puzzle without the front cover, reflecting the uncertain nature of the information they must evaluate.

In the major conflicts of the 20th century, commanders gained battlefield appreciation by melding what they were told about the dispositions of the adversary with their understanding of his likely courses of actions. Commanders estimated the enemy's logistics situation, morale, and combat effectiveness of his forces, as part of a process designed to create an informed assessment of the situation.

Intelligence, when it was available, was put to work to try and consolidate

Impressionist vision: "Street near Vétheuil in Winter," by Claude Monet, 1879 (Wikimedia)

the assessment, plus where it could fill in the blanks. This painted an incomplete picture, with important pieces of detail missing, and sometimes different information sources would conflict. Discontinuities would form between pieces of the puzzle, requiring the commander's intervention to create his view of the situation at the time, and make decisions accordingly based upon his reasonable assumptions.

The operational art focused on the need to smooth the edges formed when material was inconsistent. This could be likened to turning a painting by Picasso—with its basis in cubism, edges and discontinuities—into one created by Monet, with his basis in impressionism. The challenge is taking out the cubic nature of the image and partially clearing its representation. The situational awareness gained still lacked the total clarity of artists such as Raphael, who prided himself on the perfection and grace of his paintings, but was still readily understood by most people.

These jagged edges of the puzzle are worth exploring in a little more detail. In today's highly uncertain environment, intelligence analysts have to develop multiple hypotheses about what they are seeing. The landscapes they paint may have to be based upon several interpretations of the scene. Yet where inconsistencies arise, opportunities exist for greater understanding.

The skills to spot such inconsistencies are what we need to introduce into young analysts' training, as this is where our adversary's will show their true beliefs, since their actions will not match their deeds. Where we discover such situations is the place where commanders should focus information operations. Asking the question—so help me out here—how do you square this action with the words you have been using of late? The answer can provide a very powerful means of creating the conditions where people who may be in denial of their situation must confront what they believe.

The 21st Century Battlefield

There is an underlying assumption at the start of this century that more technology is good. Its use creates materials that allow us to understand our adversaries and to get inside their decision cycles. Through technology we can harness what we know to create a position of decision superiority. Uncertainty, it follows, is removed and decision making becomes straightforward. The picture is clear and the next stages in the campaign are self-evident. This clarity, with its associated granularity, can be likened to a painting from the Flemish School, with its emphasis upon minute attention to detail. However, evidence from recent conflicts suggests another view.

Despite the plethora of technology and our aims to exploit our dominance in the information arena, 21st century forces still have to rely upon the age-old paradigm of "advance to contact." Despite the technological superiority we hold, the picture is incomplete. Uncertainty stalks the battlefield, fueled by adversaries who are past masters at camouflage and deception. The picture that emerges is of a cubist nature, jumbled up, not clear and with missing parts.

There is little doubt that technology is a battle-winning component of contemporary warfare: it helps commanders paint their pictures. The 1991 and 2003 campaigns against Iraq highlight the benefits of technology. For example, introduction of the blue force tracking capability in the 2003 war was crucial to maintaining momentum and speeding the end of the initial campaign phase. But as we learned to our cost, contemporary warfare is not about the 21 day campaign—it is all about the 21 years it takes to rebuild a country. Painting pictures against this backdrop is somewhat different.

Historically, the commander's tools were weapons of war, killing machines designed to annihilate an adversary. We achieved victory through a combination better trained and equipped forces, whose morale was higher than the adversary, and the use of appropriate tactics. Where a force was numerically outnumbered tactics could provide additional leverage and an element of surprise. Today, images are a powerful weapon of warfare. Used correctly they can deliver messages in ways that words cannot express. The question is, are we capable of painting those pictures in ways which appeal to the wide range of different target audiences? How are we using power words to create the conditions in which we marginalize our adversary?

Influence and the Use of Power Words and Proverbs

We know warfare is not conducted in splendid isolation, but against a strategic backdrop—the landscape or background of the picture. This is what creates the setting for the main characters in the picture to play their parts. It sets a context against which our forces must conduct their operations. It is axiomatic that military imperatives and appropriate courses of action become clearer when we understand this backdrop. Influencing it requires a great deal of cultural insight.

In Afghanistan one cannot help but believe we have yet to reach a level of cultural appreciation that allows us confidently deploy that knowledge, while minimizing the associated risks of some fallout from offensive, incorrect use of words. Contemporary episodes such as the Prophet Muhammad cartoons, and the recent controversy over the Dutch film are good examples that naturally create concern for people working in the influence field.

There is however a potential way forward. Story telling is a major factor of Pashtun life, as is adherence to their customs. Pashtun parables have echoes in the writing of Western author Hans Christian Anderson, and their proverbs can often be seen as literal statements of their values. These parables feature kings, viziers, merchants, palaces and beautiful princesses in a series of complex relationships and stories that illustrate human characteristics such as vice and virtue. They blend wit, fantasy, comedy and romance—reflecting the Pashtun code of honour [Pashtunwali] and its associated morals and ethics —in a compendium of stories and tales. These stories have been passed down over the centuries by word of mouth.

If one is to create the conditions to influence people, it is possible to suggest that we should not think in English and then translate into the appropriate Afghan language. In learning another language, one is taught to think and speak in that language. Afghan proverbs provide a myriad of insights into the values that underpin their society. Each one is potentially subject to several interpretations. One example is the proverb "the Nail and the Flesh," which in one interpretation reads that relations stick by each other. Another is the Pashtun proverb that says "Go with many, eat with many," creating the sense of "don't be singular, do as others of you tribe do." It appears Pashtuns do not act in a singular way, as their culture and creed is highly tribal. But analysis shows they will break free into new thinking, if convinced they will benefit from changing their views. Islam and its religious associations are however *not* variable.

Many Pashtun parables have parallels in the English form. One example is two will become friends if a third do [sic] not come between. This has connotations in "two's company, three's a crowd." The proverb "a friend will cause you to weep, an enemy to laugh" —meaning a true friend will always tell you your faults, an enemy will flatter you—contains insights that might prove helpful, if used wisely in the context of an influence campaign. The proverb "make a friend; test him for a year; if he be proof, embrace him cordially; if not cut his acquaintance," has some important insights for anyone engaged in Reconstruction and Development [R&D] projects. We can also see its meaning in Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* when Polonious lectures his son Laertes "thy friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul," which can be literally interpreted as "keep them close."

Situational Awareness and Influence

It is axiomatic in developing influence approaches that we should understand the values of peoples and their societies, especially those we wish to engage in empathetic dialogue. This shows respect for their culture, and an awareness of how they express their feelings and opinions.

Can we truly understand the Pashtun parables? (Defense Link)

In forming his situational awareness, does the commander see the landscape of the picture in its own right, such as a painting by Gainsborough or Monet, or is his assessment based upon looking through a cubist interpretation? In an era of asymmetric warfare we have to gain insights into their culture, and granularity of information must be our watchword. This suggests we may be closer to the Flemish School of presentation. In contrast, our adversaries paint very differently: they are expressionists. They use the use the power of art to distort reality for emotional effect, and to gain resonance with their audiences; it is a highly subjective art form.

Clearly we might prefer to align our emergent military doctrine with the words written by Sun Tzu around 2,500 years ago. However idealized, his words will resonate with those who command our forces today in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with those who provide oversight and political control of the use of military power.

Our theater commanders face an agile, clever, versatile and complex adversary who uses all of our weaknesses to achieve military, political, and economic leverage. Our adversary is a political scientist, anthropologist and expert in psychology and social engineering. He knows when to advance on the physical and mental fronts—fighting limited battles and withdrawing—and using the media to broadcast his ideology, helping sustain recruitment of new soldiers for his campaign. His leaders understand and play on the widespread feelings of hurt and humiliation across the world. They develop messages that readily chime with people who are vulnerable. *Exaggeration* is one of their watchwords, but *truthfulness* is not.

Our adversaries abuse Maslow's basic human needs. They offer a way for people to achieve recognition and status through using their bodies as weapons. Our adversary plays to an extreme interpretation of religion, using semantics to get over difficulties arising in historical interpretations. Where required, he rewrites history to suit his purpose. It is hard to argue that this is a moderate form of warfare.

When Von Clausewitz wrote his words, he was clearing working on the premise that war was about major confrontation. His mindset would have been fixated by the large-scale battles he witnessed, with its associated slaughter and death. Moderation in this form of total warfare was unthinkable: it would show weakness. One fought on a total

scale with everything at one's disposal —something consonant with Al Qaeda's approach.

The Eye of the Media

In a globalized world, the media delivers imagery into the living rooms of the world. Warfare, with all its nuances and suffering, is laid bare on television, Internet and radio. Given this kind of coverage, it is hardly surprising we see people who do not sit easily with the totality of warfare. This goes to the very grain of Western society, to the core of our beliefs and values, thus serving to moderate our response. This directly challenges the precept offered by Von Clausewitz.

In these circumstances 21st century commanders must ask themselves slightly different questions: What is the right balance of kinetic and non-kinetic operations? How can I influence people not to fight? Where is the adversary's centre of gravity? How do I persuade people not to support my adversary? How do I avoid incidences of collateral damage? How do I employ military forces in harmony with other levers of power, such as politics and economics?

Today we can summarize these questions in a form that Sun Tzu would understand: Can I create the conditions in the mindsets of the people with whom I am engaged, to persuade them of the need to put down their weapons and enter a political process? War, Von Clausewitz famously said, is politics by another means. The implication, and history bears this out, is that at some point people turn from war and fighting to talking. The recent history of the Irish Republican Army is an example of this. But, when faced by an ideologically motivated adversary who loves death more than life, how can we create the conditions to move beyond the use of warfare, and enter the realm of dialogue? We may view people who will only be satisfied when they die as beyond reason and rational thought. Our approach must be to isolate and marginalize them, to such an extent that they realize their cause is a forlorn one.

Today war is conducted through the lens of the media. International radio, television and the Internet audiences bear witness to our military leaders' efforts, and limitations. Their reaction to events on the ground can shape political views, and the strategic backdrop against which military leaders have to operate. General David Petraeus' recent testimony to the US Congress, and the reaction of key political leaders in the United States is an excellent example of this phenomenon. This rejoinder modulates the conduct of war. It gives commanders another dimension to think about and can be seen to moderate an approach. Images of body bags, so much the stuff of the Vietnam War, are no longer acceptable. General Petraeus, like several other well known commanders before him, really has to have a political element to his overall situational awareness.

The media play a critical role in defining this backdrop and painting pictures. They regularly look for stories of families who have lost loved ones, or events of accidentally death. Blue-on-blue engagements bring a particular macabre fascination for the media, receiving extensive reporting and so-called analysis from experts—or to use the current idiom, "talking heads." Their impact can be disproportionate in terms of swaying an already nervous audience. Surely these experts know how warfare is conducted, and are able to speak on the subject with authority? It seems many in the media believe this to be true. Recent examples serve to highlight the weaknesses of talking heads, as their messages have a disproportionate effect on the public.

The Blitz of the Second World War was part of a total form of warfare. Everyone was in it. Today warfare is a more distant thing. It occurs a long way away from the immediate gaze of the public. It is fought by relatively small groups of highly professional men who train specifically for these operations. Only the families and friends of those engaged in the conflict really feel it on a day-to-day basis. They have a unique perspective and understanding of the fog of war, of how things can go wrong, and how people die as a consequence.

The public at home are conditioned through media's lens, with all of its overtones and implied judgements. Their understanding is limited; their lives are impacted only in passing; their interest levels rise only when something goes wrong or when they perceive an injustice. Yet this interest rapidly passes—it is cursory and unimportant to their daily lives. They are detached, unfeeling, and in some cases hostile, a view recently highlighted by [UK Chief of the General Staff] General Sir Richard Dannett.

The nature of this lens on warfare is important: it can hugely impact a campaign, and can be a moderating factor in decision making. However for the public to become more engaged it needs to be a prism—dividing the media's messages into constituent parts, allowing easier appreciation of subtle undertones and effects.

The complexities of international relations, with all of their inherent dimensions, do not lend themselves to explanation in two minute media broadcasts. Yet this is the principle means by which the greater Western public opinion is formed. Herein lies the rub. Gaining public support and engagement, against a backdrop of threats and intimidation from trans-national groups such as Al Qaeda who attack our homelands, requires simple explanation of complex issues. This requires a coordinated information campaign that harnesses all the various players, from politicians and serving military commanders. In delivering messages, they must painting pictures that explain the nature of contemporary warfare, with all its inherent problems.

Adversaries have agendas, and will seek to maximise their positions using the media to expose their arguments, and discredit the other side's actions. This battle is for the hearts and minds of the public at home. Competing messages—a confrontation through the media—are in part where we conduct warfare at the start of the 21st century.

21st Century Asymmetric Warfare

Today's adversaries, skilled in the use of asymmetric warfighting, recognize and play to our weak points in the way

they create and deliver their messages. They are the expressionists. Their canvasses harness emotion, playing to the deep seated fears of indigenous populations. Today our adversaries clearly have the upper hand in this media war. They are more agile and are able to respond to events more speedily. They use the media and the Internet to attack us in the cognitive domain, and use Improvised Electronic Devices [IED] to maim and kill our soldiers in the physical domain. Theirs is a total form of warfare which knows no form of moderation. Von Clausewitz would see much in their approach that he could understand, as would Churchill, who was clear that war should be fought at tempo. Churchill believed the harder you fought, the shorter the battle—clearly he was a fan of Von Clausewitz. Many commanders experienced his ire at their apparent procrastination. While a man of his time and of the moment, would he be capable of moderating his approach when facing contemporary warfare?

The answer to this question is difficult. We need to understand that 21st century wars can be won or lost in the hearts and minds of our own population, as well as the local population in theater. We need to be capable of confronting our adversaries on the ideological flank as well as physically. Churchill understood this above all. His WWII speeches are a testament to his belief in the contributions of the population's morale in the war effort.

Popular support for the actions of the military and their national and local governments requires people to believe that their values and morals are being applied by our commanders. They need to believe that we are being moderate [proportionate] in our response, even when faced by an enemy that operates indiscriminately, using the tactics of terror, kidnapping and intimidation. In the ever available eye of the media, we must above all set the highest standards by which we conduct warfare. Our words and deeds must be consistent.

This situation, prevalent in Iraq and Afghanistan, requires our commanders to be well versed in the cultural and religious landscapes. These forms of information are as vital as those that concern the whereabouts of our adversaries. In 21st century warfighting, he who lacks cultural insight will ultimately fail.

Therefore, our commanders have to be capable of taking confused and complex tactical and operational situations, likened to the works of surrealists, and creating a canvas that is much more readily appreciated. The public needs to see the Gainsborough! They can appreciate the elegance of the impressionists, but worry that any blurring of the imagery is deliberate, caused by spin and a lack of honesty. Cubism is beyond the public perception. The picture presented to the people must be clear and unambiguous. The words that paint this picture need similar qualities—and above all, simplicity. In this way we can maintain our population's support, the sine qua non of any form of warfare, and help create the conditions with those whom we seek to influence.

Summary

In today's globalized world, gaining and maintaining such support is difficult. The media does not help: it has its own agendas to sell copies, win journalism awards, and gain other forms of recognition. Fighting 21st century wars requires commanders to not only be capable of commanding their armies and using their equipment to best effect, it also requires them to maintain and understand the artist's form of war with all its nuances. Even today, war is still an art form not a science.

Technology per-se does not change anything in that regard. It is not a silver bullet. However, if we apply technology to harness what we know, and put it to work effectively, we offer ourselves a better chance of applying Sun Tzu's lasting dictum to win wars without starting them in the first place. Understanding the human terrain, at levels of cultural sophistication and fidelity that allows us to gain the trust and consent of local populations, is at the heart of our challenge. To gain trust, the psychologist will tell you that you need to share values. Gaining insights to these values is the crucial litmus test of whether we can move on in developing our campaign in Afghanistan and building on the success of the Surge in Iraq. These canvasses are, as they say, a work in progress.